

Front-line managers at a premium

AS THE pace of transformation in SA accelerates, many companies are reviewing the development of their front-line managers. While many organisations report chronic management skills shortages, smart players are looking within and proactively upskilling their front-line managers, says Simon Davies, principal of Partners in Performance International (PIP) SA.

Most workers obtained their managerial skills by observing their managers, says Davies.

"In the past, when the pace of managerial turnover was slower, this method worked just fine.

"However, in today's fast-paced world the development time line for new managers is shrinking and the old paradigm of managers learning how to manage just by watching their bosses doesn't necessarily apply."

Never before have so many companies in SA complained about front-line skills shortages, he says.

Davies believes that companies that actively coach front-line management are more likely to succeed in the new South African business environment.

"Often, newly appointed managers receive development training, which is undoubtedly helpful, but there is a world of difference between training and coaching. Imagine being expected to learn how to drive a car simply from classroom training — the same principle applies to new managers."

He says front-line coaching is about teaching managers to observe the dynamics of their workplace while providing them with the tools and confidence to review and influence team performance as the workday progresses.

"It is about empowering the individual to make those knowledge-based, minute-by-minute decisions that make the difference between average and outstanding team performance.

"When front-line managers understand not just the know-how but also

the know-why, they are less likely to revert to old ways of doing things; they are less likely to act like a worker and more likely to act like a manager who leads his or her team to produce outstanding results."

Because coaching is expensive it is important to link it to tangible business outcomes, says Davies.

"When you use front-line coaching to achieve a specific financial or operational outcome the results pay

for themselves. At the same time you are upskilling your management team."

In the 15 years PIP International has applied the principles of direct coaching, many companies have reported a 10% to 20% improvement in productivity.

"Clearly, front-line coaching can offer return on investment, while also adding to the skills base of SA's next generation of managers."